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## **Updated Guidance on School Closures for King County Schools Public Health – Seattle & King County**

Over the past week, consistent with national guidance from CDC, and in collaboration with school districts in King County, Public Health - Seattle & King County has recommended temporary closure of schools attended by children with the first cases of influenza A H1N1 (Swine flu) reported in our County. At the onset of this outbreak of a previously unknown influenza virus, we believed it prudent to close affected schools while we learned more about the characteristics of this new disease and the strategy for community measures to prevent illness. We appreciate the collaboration of parents, students and school officials during this early stage of the outbreak. The closures have helped to decrease spread of infection in the schools and have provided valuable time for us to gather information about this new H1N1 influenza strain in our community.

Based on information we have gathered Public Health is modifying our approach for responding to the new H1N1 strain in King County. Rather than continuing to close individual schools based on the diagnosis of cases of influenza A H1N1 in students or staff, we will instead implement a County-wide policy that focuses on keeping all students with symptoms of influenza out of school during their period of illness and recuperation, when they are potentially infectious to others. This change in policy is an enhanced version of the approach that we use during our yearly influenza season.

Recommendations for disease control measures in the community, including schools, are informed by what we know about the illness and its spread, and the practicality and consequences of the measures, including personal, family and community disruption.

- Epidemiological information from our case investigations and surveillance system suggests that this new strain has spread more widely in our community and will continue, at least for a time, to be transmitted from person to person, including children.
- Available information from local health care providers, emergency departments and hospitals, as well as information from other states, suggests that the severity of illness from the new A H1N1 influenza strain is not greater than the typical seasonal influenza that circulates in our community every year.

In short, school closure makes less sense at this time in the outbreak given what we are observing about disease transmission and the severity of illness currently associated with this A H1N1 strain. As the illness becomes more common in the community, individualized school closure based on reports of diagnosed cases is less effective, in addition to being impractical, as a control measure. Laboratory diagnosis, which is the basis of case reporting, will identify a smaller and smaller proportion of total cases as demand for testing outstrips capacity and as many students and other persons in the community with mild illness do not seek medical attention. Even now, we may not be diagnosing most influenza A H1N1 cases. Closing the schools where cases happen to be diagnosed while leaving most schools with undiagnosed cases open does not make sense as an ongoing influenza control strategy in our community.

One alternative would be to close all schools or to close all schools with any student with an influenza-like illness (which would quickly become most, if not all schools). Such a drastic step does not seem warranted by the current situation. School closures create disruption for student learning and hardships

for family budgets, particularly in these difficult economic times. In addition, County-wide school closure would not be in accordance with the U.S. national strategy for pandemic influenza, which recommends ongoing community-wide closure of all schools and daycare centers *during severe outbreaks* and in combination with other restrictive measures. Current CDC guidance on school closure decisions is flexible, allowing local public health authorities to base decisions on the local situation.

### **New Recommendations to Decrease Influenza AH1N1 in King County Schools**

- Each morning, all parents/caregivers should assess all family members and especially all school-age children for symptoms of influenza (fever and cough or sore throat cough) or other symptoms that might be influenza.
- Each morning all school faculty should assess themselves for symptoms of influenza.
- Students or faculty with influenza-like illness (fever and cough or sore throat) should stay home and not attend school. All sick students and faculty should stay out of school for at least 7 days even if their symptoms resolve sooner. Students and faculty who are still sick at 7 days should continue to stay home from school until at least 24 hours after they have completely recovered.
- If a child or adult is ill with other symptoms, they should stay home at least one day to observe how the illness develops and until completely well for 24 hours.
- Schools should be vigilant for signs and symptoms of illness among students and take every opportunity to identify ill students upon arrival and throughout the day.
- Students and staff who appear ill at arrival or become ill at school should be promptly isolated and sent home.
- Persons who are ill should stay home and not go into the community unless they need medical care. Ill students should not attend alternative child care.
- As always, situations can be individualized and school authorities may close school at their discretion. Parents may use their judgment regarding the risk and benefits of sending their children to school during this influenza outbreak as they would during a seasonal influenza outbreak.
- Schools will no longer be routinely ordered closed by Public Health on the basis of a diagnosis of suspected or confirmed cases of influenza A H1N1. As is our practice with seasonal influenza, schools may be closed if larger numbers of students or faculty become ill and school functioning becomes disrupted.

We are still in the early stages of this outbreak and the situation may change. Public Health will continue to monitor information both locally and nationally and continually assess whether changes are needed in these or other A H1N1 influenza disease control measures.

We are placing a priority on continuing to monitor disease severity and are focusing our testing and public health investigation resources on the more serious cases. We need to remember that even “routine” seasonal influenza can be a severe disease. Each year in the United States more than 200,000 people are hospitalized for flu-related complications; and about 36,000 people die from flu-related causes. Given this fact, unfortunately, as in every influenza season, we need to be prepared for the possibility of additional cases including severe cases and even deaths. Preventing the spread of influenza requires all of us – schools, families, businesses, and government – to cooperate and work together.

Useful resources

School pandemic planning checklists

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/school/index.html>

Control of Pandemic Flu Virus on Environmental Surfaces in Homes and Public Places

<http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/individual/panfacts.html>

Public Health H1N1 virus (swine flu) web site

[www.kingcounty.gov/health/swineflu](http://www.kingcounty.gov/health/swineflu)